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### Auxiliary medication instructions: one way of improving compliance

*To the editor:* Modern therapeutics have become more effective, complex and dangerous. Drugs must often be self-administered by patients whose understanding and memory are less than ideal. They may have been prescribed by a physician who was too hurried to instruct the patient in the details of when to take the medication in relation to meals and not to take it along with certain "over-the-counter" preparations such as antacids. The pharmacist may not take the time or believe he has the authority, let alone the responsibility, to give this professional advice to the patient. However, there is no substitute for individual and repeated personal counselling.

The misuse of prescription medications by ambulatory patients is both a serious and a controversial medical problem.<sup>1-15</sup> The need for positive action by the department of pharmaceutical services at the Toronto General Hospital became evident as a result of two studies performed by the out-

patient pharmacy.<sup>16,17</sup> Briefly, these studies revealed that ambulatory patients were not using their prescription drugs (and to some extent their non-prescription drugs) safely and effectively, and that a combination of verbal and written instructions reduced the number of medication errors. Therefore a project was carried out to establish a series of auxiliary medication instruction sheets.<sup>18</sup>

The instruction sheets used at the Toronto General Hospital\* contain the name of the drug (nonproprietary or generic, or the trade name for a combination product), special instructions on administration, significant potential side effects or adverse effects and how to cope with them, and special storage instructions when applicable (Fig. 1). The use of a separate sheet for each drug has certain advantages: each is tailor-made for the specific drug, changes in the information are made easily, errors in distribution are reduced (generic names appear on both the instruction sheet and the prescription label and the patient can associate a specific instruction sheet with a specific prescription), and distribution time is reduced since it is not necessary to con-

\*Copies may be obtained from Mr. W. Marigold, Manager, Department of pharmaceutical services, Toronto General Hospital, 101 College St., Toronto, Ont. M5G 1L7, for \$2 (please make cheque payable to the Toronto General Hospital).

sult a master list or to check off pertinent instructions. The medication instruction sheets are also used by the ward pharmacist counselling patients in the self-medication program and before discharge from the hospital.

Since the problem of patient compliance is complex and controversial, no single solution may be completely satisfactory. However, the positive approach we describe is one possibility.

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<p>TORONTO GENERAL HOSPITAL PHARMACY DEPT.</p> <p><b>AMPICILLIN</b></p> <p>Take this medication on an empty stomach 1 hour before meals or 2 hours after meals. However, do not omit a dose if the above is forgotten.</p> <p>Continue taking this medication until it is all finished, even if you start feeling better.</p> <p>If you develop a skin rash, or severe diarrhea, contact your physician.</p> <p><b>If you are allergic to penicillin</b>, be sure to notify your physician before taking this medication.</p> <p>TORONTO GENERAL HOSPITAL PHARMACY DEPT.</p> <p><b>GUANETHIDINE</b></p> <p>Hypertension (high blood pressure) rarely shows visible symptoms; therefore, do not discontinue the use of this medication without the advice of your physician.</p> <p>While on this medication, be sure to get up slowly after lying down. Sit up with your legs dangling over the edge of the bed for 1 or 2 minutes before standing up, to avoid getting dizzy.</p>	<p>TORONTO GENERAL HOSPITAL PHARMACY DEPT.</p> <p><b>BISACODYL TABLETS</b></p> <p>Do not take any milk or antacids within 1 hour of taking this medication.</p> <p>Do not chew the tablet. Swallow it whole.</p> <p>TORONTO GENERAL HOSPITAL PHARMACY DEPT.</p> <p><b>NITROGLYCERIN</b></p> <p>These tablets may deteriorate with heat or moisture. Therefore, keep the bottle tightly closed in a cool place at home. Carry only a few tablets in an outside pocket or purse in a brown glass bottle.</p> <p>Do not place cotton or other medications in the bottle with these tablets. If you have not used the tablets within 3 months, you should obtain a fresh supply. Do not swallow the tablet. Place under the tongue and hold there until it dissolves.</p> <p>If relief from pain is not obtained, another tablet may be taken. This medication may cause mild gastrointestinal upset, flushing, headache, rapid heart rate or dizziness. If so, sit or lie down when taking nitroglycerin.</p>
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FIG. 1—Examples of auxiliary medication instructions used at the Toronto General Hospital.